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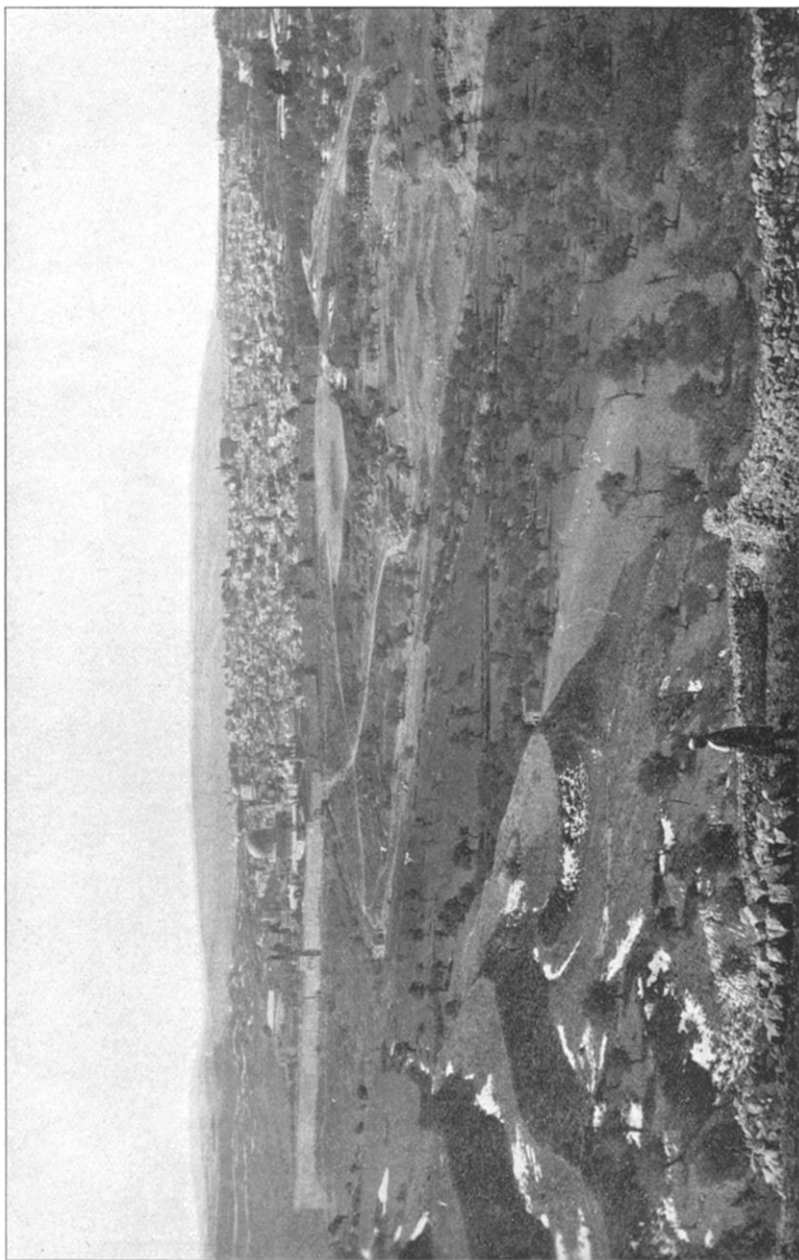
THE HILLTOPS OF PALESTINE.

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THE hilltops of Palestine present two marked features to the view of modern travelers: first, the "cities set on the hills," the abodes of the living; second, the *welys*, or tombs of saints, built upon summits otherwise bare, the abodes of the dead.

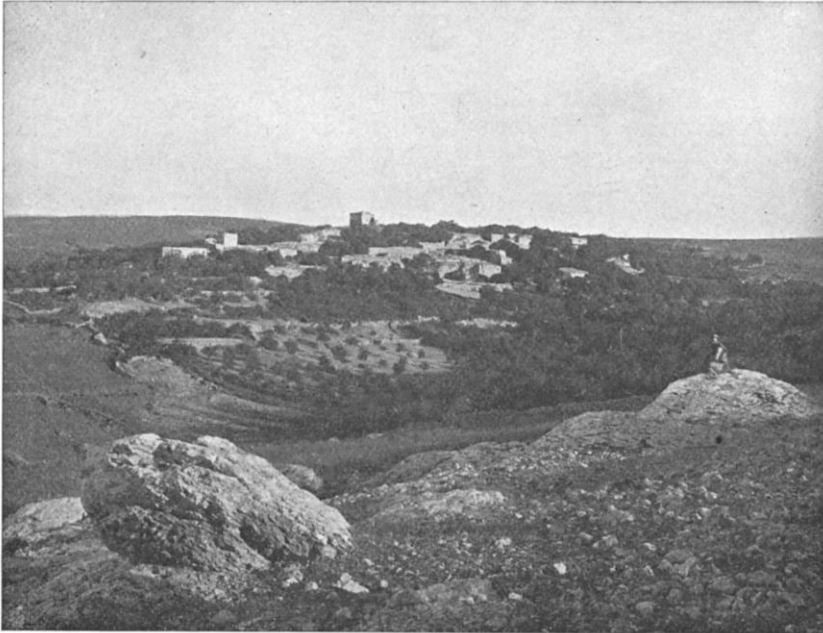
It must be supposed that the original reason for choosing the tops of hills for the sites of cities and villages was their adaptability to defense. Other and secondary advantages may have been gained, as the greater comfort and health to be secured from the elevated station, avoiding the stifling heat of the valleys and the dampness of the plains at certain times of the year. But doubtless the prime reason was that of defense. A town thus placed could see the approach of a foe, prepare for the onset earlier, and repel more successfully the assault. Neighboring towns could combine their efforts with more facility, communicating with each other by signals, than if they were in valleys with hills intercepting the view between them. But few conspicuous exceptions are found—the seacoast cities; Jericho, in the plain of the Jordan, always weak and never successfully resisting a siege; Shechem, in the deep hollow between Ebal and Gerezim, having no military advantage, but central and near the chief sanctuary of the Samaritans; Gaza, the oasis city of the south, like Damascus, the oasis city of the north, commercial centers that depended for their very existence upon the abundant waters of their sites, and upon the conjunction of great roads binding nations together. Other names will occur to the reader, but by far the largest number of towns are seen upon strategic heights, if not so conspicuous as Safed, yet well placed, like Jerusalem itself, to repel assault.

It is not strange that "the strength of the hills" should have



JERUSALEM FROM SCOPAS.

impressed itself upon the dwellers of the land, a strength of immensity and immobility, to which was added a military value. Everywhere else, too, in Asia and Europe, particularly in southern Italy, the same preference for the sites of cities upon sum-

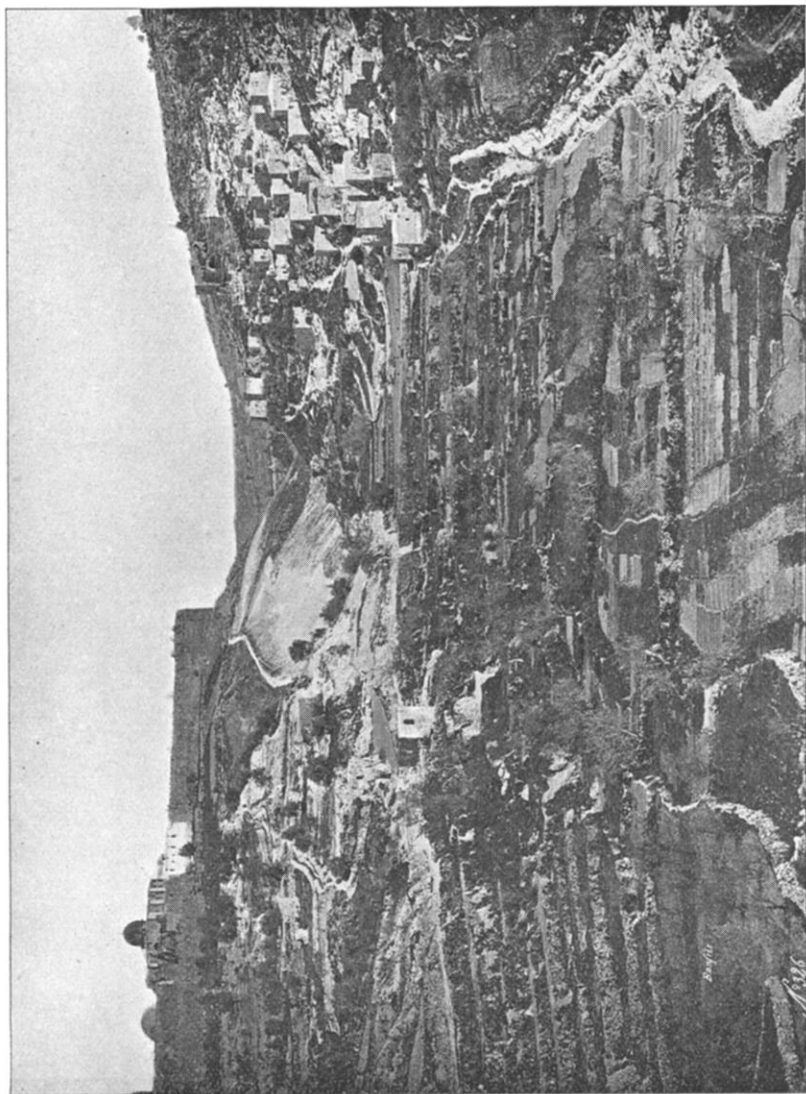


MODERN BETHEL

mits is found, the natural choice in times when missiles could not be hurled across spaces miles in extent, and battles must be fought hand to hand, and assaults made "in the deadly breach." And here it should be noted that the hilltops surrounding a city, at least in Palestine, were not a source of strength to it. When the Psalmist said: "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, whence cometh my help," he did not refer to the bulwarks afforded by the heights around Jerusalem, as nearly all commentators assert, though he may have thought of rescue coming over the hills from afar. The hills around Jerusalem are a menace to the city rather than a defense. They are not precipitous; such passes

as exist were many times threaded by armies; and the hills that rise to gentle heights above the city, so far from protecting it, afford a view of its walls and interior highly advantageous to an enemy. The real defenses of Jerusalem were its valleys and the walls crowning the crests of their rocky edges. The valleys of the Kidron and Gihon were really gigantic fosses that foiled every foe, except when their natural strength bred an over-confidence, as when David's men crept up by the water gullies, as Wolfe's did at Quebec, and found the heights unguarded. Even Titus declared after taking the city that its natural defenses, combined with its walls and towers, made it well-nigh impregnable, and that he never could have taken it without the direct aid of the gods! The whole military strength of the city lay in its own hills, not in those around it. There seems to be only one passage, Ps. 125:1, 2, in which the surrounding mountains are regarded as a defense to Jerusalem, and even here the first reference is to the security of Mount Zion in itself: "They that trust in the Lord are as Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abideth forever. As the mountains are round about Jerusalem, so the Lord is round about his people." But Dean Stanley (quoted by Perowne *in loco*) quotes from Josephus (*Bell. Jud.*, VI, 5, 1), and infers, wrongly I think, that in the understanding of the Jews the phrase included the steep Moabite hills beyond the Jordan, which "always seemed to rise as a wall against invaders from the remote east." But if the inference is wrong, it yet shows the difficulty of regarding the *immediate* environment of hills as a protection. Better would it be to refer the expression in general to the whole range on which the city stood, or other hill-towns, needing reduction before an enemy could successfully assail the Holy City. Such towns were many, "fenced cities," like Bethel, Gibeah, Gibeon, Mizpeh, Ramah, Bethlehem, and some of their names are words signifying a hill.

But if the military explanation for such passages fails us, we have another far more significant in the selection of the hilltop as a place of special sanctity. Long before David or the time of any of the Psalms, and in the religious schemes of many nations, the "high places" were the abode of the gods. Intimately



VALLEY OF THE KIDRON FROM THE SOUTH

associated with the idolatries of the heathen, such sanctuaries were strictly forbidden to monotheistic Israel, and the altars and groves upon the summits were destroyed, or left to the devotees of foreign cults who, from time to time, came into the land. Ahab's Canaanitish queen reared temples and planted groves to the deities of her own people. And Solomon's defection lay in suffering his Egyptian princess to pollute in like manner the slopes east of Jerusalem, while he joined the worship of her false gods with that of Jehovah. Time had been when it was a comparatively innocent act to erect such places of worship, as Abraham and Noah, Gideon and Manoah, and even much later Samuel and Saul and David and Elijah had so done with the divine sanction; but more and more it came to mean idolatry and every base form of worship, and the practice was forbidden. Nevertheless the nations around continued it, and Israel was never without the knowledge of groves and high places as the reputed abode of deity.

Now the *wely* of today is the remote relic of the ancient customs. It is true that the *wely* is a Mohammedan structure, and it cannot embody the ideas of idolatry as the ancient high places did. The sanctity of the *wely* is rather that of the holy dead, for it is the burial place, real or honorary, of some revered religious man. It is not always on a hilltop, but that is its most favored position, as *Kubbet esh Shuhadah*, the Dome of the Witnesses, is on the Mount of Olives, the *wely* of *Abu Ismain* (Ishmael) on Gerezim, the *wely* Siman at Nazareth, and the tomb of Jonah at Halhul (as well as at two other places also). But wherever found upon a hilltop it is so placed on account of the old idea that such a "high place" is especially appropriate to a sanctuary. The pilgrim on the plain lifts up his eyes to the hills, and, seeing one of these white tombs afar off, stoops and builds a little pile of stones by the wayside in token of his reverence. As the *wely* is the remote descendant of the high place, so the pilgrim's little pile of stones is the poor imitation of the pillars set up at Jordan and at Bethel to commemorate the signal presence and revelation of God. Generally at least one tree stands beside the *wely*, and this is the lone survivor of the grove

of ancient time. The people regard the precincts of the tomb and tree as sacred ground. Articles left in the shadow of either are as safe as under lock and key. No robber would dare molest them, for they are under the mysterious protection of the holi-

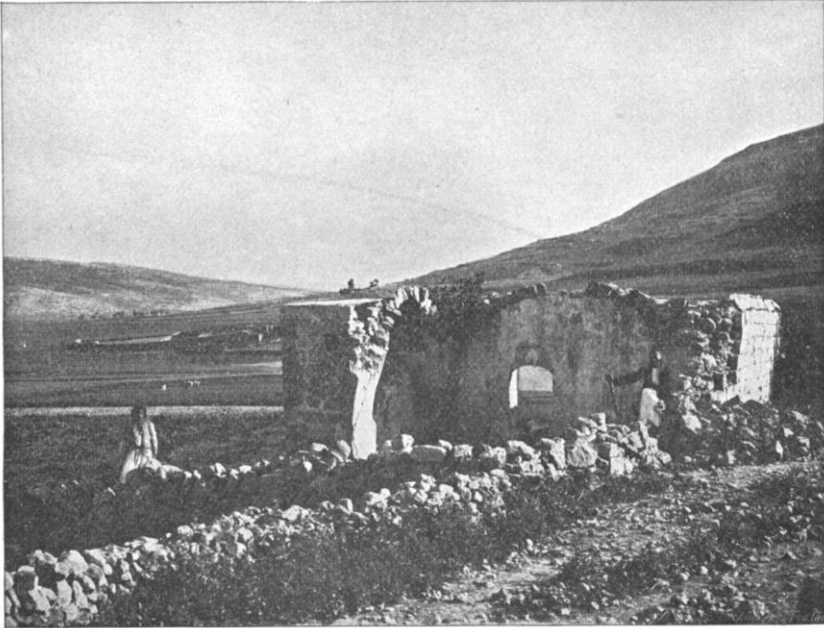


WELY ON MOUNT GEREZIM

ness, the divinity of the place. A poor woman gathers sticks for her winter fuel, and, leaving them under the white walls on the hilltop until winter, is sure of her fire when the cold days come. A sleeper beneath the shade of the tree fears no robber. In many cases he who puts the slightest dishonor upon the shrine is in danger of his life. I witnessed at Joseph's tomb near Sychar an instance of such feeling, when our guide had thrown down a few stones from an adjacent wall, that we might view the interior through a window. A frightful noise suddenly arose, and it was found that a dumb man, "possessed," as in the

Savior's time, was bitterly angered by the sacrilege, and in his intense excitement was uttering his horrible cries.

Now, with such feelings and such relics today as the remote witnesses to the ancient sentiment and customs, it is easy to read



TOMB OF JOSEPH

the Psalmist's word in a new light. "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, whence cometh my help," Ps. 121 : 1, 2. "As all other men turn to their sacred heights, so will I turn, but with far different thoughts, for *my* help cometh from Jehovah, which made heaven and earth. It is he who will not suffer thy foot to be moved, and it is he who, watching over Israel, slumbers not, nor sleeps. I need no outcry, no clashing of cymbals, to awaken my God, and no lascivious dance nor shameful offering is required to please him. He is not Baal; my God is not Ashtoreth: my God is the Lord, and the hills themselves, yes, and

the stars above them, are of his creation. He is my helper, and even the shadow of his presence is safety and peace." "He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of Jehovah, he



SCOPAS AND THE MOUNT OF OLIVES

is my fortress, my refuge, my God, in him will I trust (Ps. 91:1, 2), not in any power less holy, nor in any god of the nations."

It may be that the hills of Jerusalem itself, crowned with the gleaming temple, are the summits before the eyes of this singer. It may be that from Jerusalem he was looking forth upon some distant grove not yet destroyed by the hostility of Israel's faith. It may be that he saw only in mind the innumerable hilltops in all the idolatrous world around him, and so contrasted with them his own vision of One God, Israel's Jehovah. But, whatever the

conditions, is it not clear that he sang not so much with the thought that his God was greater than any man or army of men that might come from over the hills, as with the feeling that his God was greater than any gods? "O give thanks unto the God of gods, for his mercy endureth forever" (Ps. 136:2). "Before the gods will I sing praises unto thee, I will worship toward thy holy temple" (Ps. 138:2). Not toward their temples profane and hateful will I worship, but towards the heights of Zion, the temple of Jehovah. If the sanctity of the "high place" is so great even in this remote day, we may have some idea of what it was to the heathen whose gods dwelt in that lofty seclusion, and of how much greater holiness his high place must have been to a devout and spiritual Israelite, who knew that his God was above all gods, and that even the heaven of heavens could not contain him.